

Wolfpack begin defense of Class A state title

- Adam Carrington
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Whitefield Academy's Stephen Hellier, right, will be one the of the leaders the Wolfpack will count on to try to defend their Class A state title.

Whitefield Academy was not expecting to have a massive target on its back this quickly.

That is the one disadvantage, if it should be classified as such, of winning a Class A state championship last year with a thrilling 2-1 victory over Walker, only four years after not having enough players to even field a team.

Whitefield coach Steve Hellier will be cautiously optimistic in 2018. The good news for Hellier and the Wolfpack, all but one starter is returning.

“Last year, we got on a roll. I didn’t know what happened,” Hellier said. “I didn’t feel like think we were most talented team. There were so many things that went our way. Now we are in situation we didn’t think we’d be in. It will be interesting to see how these guys can handle a target on their back.”

Even with 10 starters back, the Wolfpack will still have a few changes.

Last year’s team was built around midfielder William Hellier. With Hellier graduating, new leadership will have to emerge. The Wolfpack will look to its three captains —senior defender Jacob Burkette, senior midfielder Stephen Hellier and senior forward Josh Orr.

Whitefield is also expecting big things from sophomore newcomer Casey Torres, a projected starter in the midfield and returning senior goalkeeper John Matherne.

“We’re going to do our best and be as prepared as we can,” Steve Hellier said. “But you know, there are a lot of things that have to work out starting with us being injury free and coming together. It’s going to be significant transition from last year to this year because we are not going to have that real go-to guy. It’s going to be everyone doing their part and taking care of what they need to do.”

Walker, on the other hand, may face some early-season adversity with a new coach and seven new starters.

The Wolverines return sophomore forward Thomas Rath, who led in scoring with 27 goals last season. Also, they return senior defenders Kyle Goldstein and Austin Gass.

While the rest of the lineup will be inexperienced, they appear to have the skill set.

“We have a lot of youth this year,” Walker coach Lamar Howard said. “So getting those young players up to speed in the varsity game will be an early challenge.”

In Class AAAAAAA, Pebblebrook is coming off a banner season as the state runner-up.

It will be tough replacing forwards Jair Lopez and Arnold Martinez and midfielder Angel Bonilla.

According to Pebblebrook coach Anton Banfield, the Falcons are taking the “last year was last year” approach in attempt to have a successful 2018 behind senior forward Carlos Diaz, senior midfielder Blany Zamora and senior defender Saul Martinez.

“This year, we are a little more balanced,” Banfield said. “We have talented players up front but most important is that we complement each other. They are hungry. They chased (the state title) last year and it’s rubbing off on the younger guys. They want to complete the task this time.”

Walton and Allatoona are looking to compete the task as well after coming up two games shy.

The Raiders are in good shape up top and in the midfield but will have to reload in the back. The Buccaneers may have to groom a few freshmen but should have plenty of scoring power up front.